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Henry Waxman to retire at end of congressional session

By [Karen Tumulty](#), Published: January 30

Rep. Henry A. Waxman (D-Calif.), one of the most prolific and successful lawmakers of modern times, announced Thursday that he will retire at the end of the congressional session.

“Forty years have gone by very quickly. I have a great deal of satisfaction in our legislative accomplishments,” Waxman, 74, said in an interview the afternoon before he made his intention public. “This is a good time to move on and have another chapter.”

Waxman is [the 17th House member](#) — 10 Republicans; seven Democrats — to call it quits. Fourteen others are running for the Senate or for governor.

Although his Los Angeles seat appears almost certain to remain Democratic, his departure after 20 terms will leave a void of experience and legislative skill in the liberal ranks.

President Obama called the congressman “one of the most accomplished legislators of his or any era.”

Waxman insisted that his decision was not made out of frustration with a political environment where it has become virtually impossible to accomplish anything substantial, and that it is not a reflection of the Democrats’ dim prospects for winning back the House and restoring him to a committee chairmanship.

The walls of Waxman’s suite in the Rayburn House Office Building are covered with picture frames holding pens that were used by every president since Jimmy Carter to sign legislation that Waxman played a crucial role in writing.

Among that legislation were laws to make infant formula safer and more nutritious (1980), bring low-priced generic drugs to market (1984), clean the air (1990), provide services and medical care to people with AIDS (1996), and reform and modernize the Postal Service (2006). He also was instrumental in the passage of the Affordable Care Act, President Obama’s signature health-care law, in 2010.

The secret to effective legislating, Waxman said, is “you outlast [the opposition]. You keep working. You keep looking for combinations.”

“Everything I ever passed into law, with one exception, had bipartisan support,” he added. “And the exception was the Affordable Care Act, where the Republicans should have been working with us but didn’t want to give President Obama a victory, even though the law was based on a lot of Republican ideas.” (Waxman had once

advocated a single-payer Canadian-style health-care system.)

Many Republicans would disagree with Waxman's assessment of himself as a builder of bridges across the aisle. When his retirement was announced at a closed meeting during a House GOP retreat on Maryland's Eastern Shore, the room erupted in applause.

For all the finesse he showed in writing legislation as he rose on the Energy and Commerce Committee, Waxman was legendarily aggressive in his role as the Democrats' chief inquisitor on the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform.

With one of the most highly regarded staffs on Capitol Hill, he led investigations that delved into tobacco-industry marketing practices, the use of steroids in professional sports, the 2008 collapse of Wall Street and the flawed intelligence that was used to justify the Iraq war.

Bald, soft-spoken and standing 5 foot 5, Waxman appears surprisingly unintimidating for one who was dubbed the ["Democrats' Eliot Ness"](#) by the liberal Nation magazine. The answer to a 2012 "Jeopardy!" question about him was: "The mustache of justice."

The scope and number of legislative achievements Waxman can claim — through Democrats and Republicans in the White House, and while serving in the House majority and minority — would seem nearly unimaginable in today's gridlocked, polarized Congress.

But he contended that lawmaking has never been easy.

"For the most part, those laws have been very important and successful and are now taken for granted," he said of his accomplishments. "People don't realize that it was a big fight over many years to get a Clean Air Act adopted and signed, which is one of the most effective environmental laws that we have ever had in this country. And it took a long time just to get nutritional-labeling information so that people can follow their diets and control what they eat.

"Even the HIV/AIDS legislation known as the Ryan White act was not accomplished for almost a decade after we held our first hearings just to find out what was going on when gay men were dying from a rare cancer known as Kaposi's sarcoma, and no one knew why this was happening and seemed to be happening in geometric progression," Waxman recalled.

Waxman's departure will mark the end of an era. He and fellow Californian George Miller, who [announced his retirement](#) this month — are the last two continuously serving House Democrats from the huge class of "Watergate babies" elected in 1974, just three months after [President Richard M. Nixon resigned](#).

Seventy-five Democrats in all and half younger than 40, they were hailed as a reform-minded generation that would upset the old order and remake Washington. In their first years in office, they toppled three change-resistant Democratic committee chairmen, which was a nearly unheard of act of insubordination.

By Ronald Reagan's election in 1980, however, the center of political gravity had swung back to the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue.

Yet even as the Republican president was cutting taxes and taking aim at social spending, Waxman had some of his most productive years. He found ways to expand programs such as Medicare and Medicaid. And some of

his fiercest battles were fought with powerful industrial-state Democrats, including Rep. John D. Dingell (Mich.), over environmental laws.

“The sine qua non of Henry’s accomplishments came during the Reagan administration,” said congressional scholar [Norman J. Ornstein](#) of the American Enterprise Institute. “It wasn’t just holding the line. He managed to get half a loaf here and half a loaf there, and he wound up with a bigger loaf of bread for things he cared about. It wasn’t that he had a lot of leverage. He just knew how to negotiate.”

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